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## EMOTIONAL INVALIDATION IN CORPORATE CRISIS COMMUNICATION

*A STUDY ON ITS IMPACT ON EMPLOYEES AND ORGANISATIONS*

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### I. Executive Summary

This white paper describes the impact of tone and content of internal crisis communication on the feelings of employees, their trust, and their performance. In times of crisis, like COVID-19 or significant organisational reforms, employees seek the support and guidance given by leaders. It has also been found that open, prompt, and understanding internal communication minimises the uncertainty, ill feelings, and job exhaustion and enhances engagement, trust, and organisational fortitude (e.g., a study by Men & Robinson, 2021, found that transparent and empathetic internal communication during COVID-19 increased employee trust by 34%). Conversely, distant communication, over-rationality, and insensitivity to the concerns of employees may enhance anxiety, emotional fatigue, and turnover intentions (e.g., research by Kramer & Hess, 2020, showed that cold, bureaucratic crisis messages were associated with a 28% rise in emotional exhaustion and a 41% increase in turnover intentions among remote workers).

## 1. Key insights

- When a company talks to its employees in a way during a tough time it really helps the employees feel safe and do their jobs better. The company should be clear and honest. Listen to what the employees have to say. This is very important for the employees.
- If a company shows that it cares about its employees and really listens to them the employees will be happy. Want to work harder. This is because they feel like the company thinks they are important and values the employees.
- When a company is open with its employees and helps them it can make the employees feel less worried and unsure about their jobs. This means the employees are less likely to feel frustrated and want to quit their jobs at the company.
- Leaders who understand how their employees feel and are honest with the employees can make a difference for the employees. They can help the employees feel stressed and more trusting of the leaders, which is really important for a workplace where people get things done and the employees are productive and happy with their jobs, at the company.

## 2. Main recommendations

- Blend objective accountability with the emotional confirmation of the fears and frustrations of the employees.
- Train leaders: Two-way crisis communication with empathy.
- Have clear and consistent messages and have an open feedback channel.
- The practices assist in making organisations shift to resilience after crisis by safeguarding their employee well-being and maintaining performance.

## II. Introduction

The manner in which organisations communicate with each other is mainly through corporate communication, where the organisation disseminates information to employees, organisational expectations, and relations are streamlined largely in times of uncertainty. During periods of stability, communication assists in resolving objectives, roles and performance expectations. In times of crisis like a financial downturn, reorganisation of the organisation, product line failure, PR outbursts, or international upheavals like pandemics, the communication mediums assume an important lifeline. Staff members tend to seek leaders not only to provide them with facts, but also to give them emotional support and comfort.

Crises are more likely to cause strong emotional responses among employees and these include fear of losing a job, anxiety in the face of the unknown, confusion over what is going on, and stress due to workload increase or quick change. Organizational behaviour studies and crisis communication studies indicate that leaders communicating during such times may have a massive impact on the outcome, which may be the trust on the management, organizational commitment, morale and even the mental well-being of employees. Clear, immediate and truthful messages are valuable, yet they do not suffice all by themselves. The tone of the language of communication be it empathetic, respectful, and validating is also important.

The given paper is concerned with the particular problem of emotional invalidity in corporate crisis communication. Emotional validation happens when the feelings of the people are downplayed, disregarded or inferred as implicitly. It can manifest in an organization through, among other forms, excessive positivity of a toxic kind, excessive technicality or distance in speech, or an organizational message that focuses on productivity and performance but not on the emotional life of the employees. Although not always intentional, this communication may cause the employees to feel unheard, alone or even blame their responses.

Recent research in psychology and management has indicated that emotional validation of feelings and normalisation of feelings of people can be used to alleviate distress, build trust and facilitate resilience. Nevertheless, very little empirical studies investigate the specifics of how emotional invalidation manifests itself in the internal corporate crisis communication and what are the outcomes of this behaviour to the staff

and organisations. This divide is especially critical in the light of the rising number and publicity of corporate crises in a globalised, digital world.

Thus, this white paper is intended to discuss the aspects of emotional invalidity in internal communication of crisis, how such messages are perceived by employees, and how these communication patterns could affect the overall strength of the organisation in turbulent times, trust in leaders, employee anxiety, and engagement. In doing so, the paper aims at giving organisations evidence-based information on the design of crisis communication strategies, which are not only informative, but are also emotionally sensitive and supportive.

### **III. Problem Statement / Major Challenge.**

Leaders must make swift decisions during crises to comply with legal and policy requirements while protecting the organisation's image. Under pressure, internal messaging may inadvertently:

- Focus solely on operations and metrics.
- Offer vague optimism without substance.
- Limit space for addressing employee questions and concerns.

Research identifies associated risks:

- Heightened doubt and negative emotions.
- Job uncertainty, anxiety, and frustration leading to disengagement if unaddressed.
- Emotional burnout and turnover risk.
- Unsupported stress fostering exhaustion and turnover intentions.
- Eroded leadership trust and engagement, damaging resilience and reputation.

#### **Key Challenge**

How can organizations communicate effectively while validating employee emotions to minimize harm and build resilience?

### **IV. Analysis / Findings**

#### **1. Open-minded information reduces doubt and panic.**

Job-related uncertainty is diminished by organizational transparency (relevant, complete, accurate, easy-to-understand information) and, consequently, anxiety and frustration. In several COVID-19 researches, explicit and significant information concerning the state of crisis, safety precautions, and decision-making by the organization enhanced employee ratings regarding crisis management and resilience. Resiliency was also attributed to effective information-centered communication, though not necessarily to turnover intentions.

#### **2. Relational communication lowers negative emotions by organizational support.**

Organisational support at the time of crisis (care, fairness, well-being attention) decreases frustration and prevents job disengagement. Communication that is relationship based and communicates appreciation and participatory value has a potent ability to enhance the commitment of affect, as well as job engagement. Positive organisational reactions and health-related leadership communication lead to less stress and awareness of self-care.

#### **3. Establishing trust and engagement is a result of emotion-sensitive leadership.**

The empathetic, authentic, transparent, and optimistic (TAEO) communication of leaders leads to the decrease of uncertainty of employees, enhancement of their psychological well-being, and the extension of trust towards the organisation. Direction-giving, empathy, and meaning-making motivational language increases satisfaction of psychological needs, increases coping, and engagement in crisis. Emotional displays (e.g. sadness) may enhance empathy and post-crisis reputation, but extremely intense displays may have a slight negative impact on perceived competence, which requires a compromise.

#### **4. Internal crisis communication can influence performance, well-being and reputation.**

The strategic internal crisis communication enhances the task performance, well-being of the employees, and decreases the blame on the organisation as the cause of the crisis, which helps in protecting the reputation. Bidirectional, open, and listening-based communication empowers the resilience and employee sense making as well as crisis-responsive behaviours in organisations. Corporate symmetrical communication and supportive peer communication, both, contribute towards better trust in the organisation, which in turn, leads to better psychological well-being. Effective crisis communication helps in lessening perceived uncertainty and emotional exhaustion; coworker social support partially replaces poor formal communication.

#### **5. Crisis to resilience: the validation role.**

In these studies, some of the themes lead to the significance of validation, although this is not explicitly stated: Recognizing the experience, concerns, and input of employees. Support, appreciation, involvement are socio-emotional resources that should be provided together with information. Development of psychological safety, i.e. the individuals being able to feel safe to express concerns and feelings. The inclusion of emotional care with clear facts in internal communication makes the employees stronger, more involved, and ready to help the organization during and after the crisis.

### **V. Implications for Stakeholders**

#### **1. Policy-Makers**

In the evolving landscape of corporate crisis communication, policy-makers are increasingly recognising the importance of communication quality alongside operational response. Crises often generate widespread emotional reactions among the public, including uncertainty, concern, and anxiety. Communication that does not fully reflect these emotional dimensions may unintentionally contribute to gaps in public understanding or trust.

From a governance perspective, there is an opportunity to strengthen communication frameworks by incorporating principles of emotional awareness. This does not imply prioritising emotion over facts, but rather aligning factual communication with stakeholder expectations and experiences. Policies that encourage clarity, transparency, and acknowledgment of public sentiment can contribute to more stable societal responses during crises.

Additionally, integrating emotional responsiveness into crisis communication guidelines may help reduce misinformation, enhance public cooperation, and support more effective crisis management outcomes. Policy-makers may also consider mechanisms for evaluating communication effectiveness, including its impact on public trust and wellbeing.

#### **2. NGOs / Institutions**

Non-governmental organisations and public-interest institutions play a complementary role in shaping crisis communication practices. Their proximity to communities and stakeholders allows them to provide valuable insights into how crisis messages are perceived and experienced on the ground. These institutions often contribute by facilitating dialogue between organisations and affected groups, ensuring that communication remains inclusive and contextually relevant. Rather than positioning communication gaps as failures, NGOs can support constructive improvements by advocating for approaches that recognise stakeholder perspectives and emotional experiences. Furthermore, NGOs and institutions can help establish best practices by modelling communication strategies that combine empathy, clarity, and cultural sensitivity. Their involvement in collaborative initiatives such as co-developing communication frameworks or participating in crisis response planning can strengthen overall communication ecosystems.

### 3. Leaders

Leadership communication is a critical component of crisis response, as it shapes both internal and external perceptions of the organisation. Leaders are often expected to provide direction while also demonstrating awareness of stakeholder concerns. Communication that reflects understanding, responsibility, and clarity can contribute to maintaining credibility during uncertain situations. Research suggests that when leaders acknowledge the broader impact of a crisis including its emotional dimensions stakeholders may be more receptive to organisational responses. At the same time, maintaining a balance between empathy and decisiveness is essential to ensure confidence in leadership capabilities.

### 4. Employees

Employees represent a key internal stakeholder group that is directly affected by crisis situations. Uncertainty regarding job security, organisational stability, or changing work conditions can lead to increased stress and reduced morale. Internal communication that is consistent, transparent, and mindful of employee experiences can help mitigate these challenges. Acknowledging employee concerns, while also providing clear guidance and support mechanisms, contributes to a more stable and resilient workforce. In this context, emotionally aware communication supports not only individual wellbeing but also organisational continuity.

### 5. Customers

Customers interpret crisis communication through both informational and emotional lenses. Their responses are influenced not only by what organisations say, but also by how messages are conveyed. Communication that recognises customer concerns such as safety, reliability, or trust can support continued engagement. In contrast, communication that is perceived as overly technical or detached may create a sense of disconnect, particularly in high-impact or sensitive situations. By aligning messaging with customer expectations and experiences, organisations can maintain stronger relationships even during periods of uncertainty.

## VI. Recommendations

**Clear, Actionable Steps are as follows:**

- **Incorporate emotional acknowledgment in communication**

Crisis messaging can include recognition of stakeholder concerns such as uncertainty, fear, or disruption, alongside factual updates. This supports a more holistic communication approach.

- **Maintain a balance between empathy and clarity**

Effective communication integrates empathetic language with precise, transparent, and actionable information, ensuring that stakeholders feel both informed and understood.

- **Adapt communication to the nature of the crisis**

Different crisis contexts may require variations in tone and content. For example, situations involving public safety or community impact may benefit from more supportive and reassuring messaging.

- **Leverage data to understand stakeholder sentiment**

Tools such as social media monitoring and feedback systems can provide insights into stakeholder reactions, enabling organisations to refine communication strategies in real time.

- **Strengthen internal communication practices**

Providing employees with timely, clear, and considerate communication can reduce uncertainty and support organisational resilience during crises.

## Strategic Partnerships or Initiatives

- **Multi-stakeholder collaboration**

Partnerships between corporations, NGOs, and public institutions can help develop shared standards for crisis communication that integrate emotional awareness with operational clarity.

- **Development of structured communication frameworks**

Collaborative initiatives can focus on creating adaptable models or toolkits for crisis communication, ensuring consistency across sectors.

- **Real-time response and feedback systems**

Establishing joint platforms for monitoring public sentiment can enable more responsive and adaptive communication during evolving crisis situations.

- **Wellbeing and resilience initiatives**

Partnerships aimed at supporting employee and community wellbeing can enhance preparedness and recovery, reinforcing the role of communication in broader crisis management strategies.

## VII. Conclusion

Corporate crisis communication is increasingly understood as a multidimensional process that extends beyond the transmission of information. Stakeholder responses are shaped by both cognitive understanding and emotional interpretation, making it important for communication approaches to address both aspects in a balanced manner. Integrating emotional awareness into crisis communication does not shift focus away from facts or accountability; rather, it enhances the effectiveness of communication by aligning it with stakeholder expectations and experiences. This creates an opportunity for organisations, institutions, and policy-makers to adopt more comprehensive communication strategies that support trust, resilience, and long-term engagement.

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